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ABSTRACT

The articles in this volume address the teaching of composition. Chapters include D. G. Kehl's "A Rhetorical Question--With or Without an Answer," which examines the import of the rhetorical question, "How can I prepare my students for freshman English"; Arthur Donart's "A Behavioristic Approach to Teaching Freshman Composition"; Linda Houghton's "Maximizing Proofreading," which urges the use of proofreading in the classroom; and Paula Backsheider's "Turn on the Power: Marking and Grading in Remedial Composition." (HOD)

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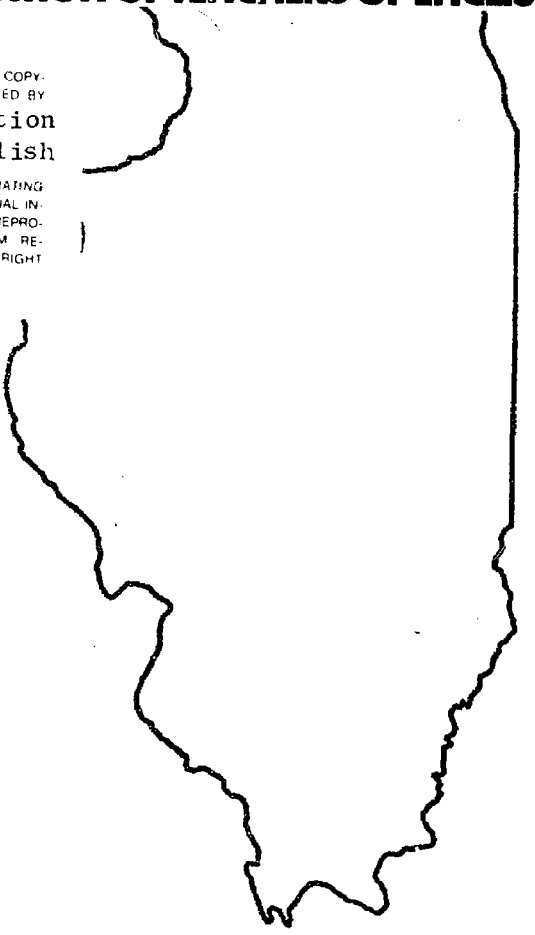

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Contents

ILLINOIS ENGLISH BULLETIN
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A Rhetorical Question — With or Without an Answer

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"Freshman English is one of those things like spinach and tetanus shots that young people put up with because their elders say they must.... They will have been prepared for this course by their high school teachers — warned, threatened, cajoled, sometimes taught — but few of them look forward to it with confidence, fewer still with pleasure." So wrote Albert Kitzhaber in *Themes, Theories, and Therapy* (1963, p. 1). High school teachers, feeling obliged to prepare their charges for the distaste of college spinach and anxious somehow to inure their students' posteriors to the unpleasantness of the college needle jabs, write letters like this one to college directors of freshman composition: "I am teaching two classes of senior English at ——— High School with a total of ——— students. The majority of these students plan to attend college upon graduation from high school and are quite worried about their college preparation for freshman English. How can I prepare my students for freshman English?"

Perhaps this recurring question is best construed as rhetorical. As every English teacher knows, a rhetorical question is one intended to produce an oratorical or literary effect and not to elicit reply, as in, for example, "What is so rare as a day in June?" or, in the case of freshman English, "What is so rare as a day in September?" when high school seniors are suddenly expected to metamorphose into college students.

The usual effect of a rhetorical question is a reflective, often assenting, silence; or an ejaculation resembling the Old Testament psalmist's *selah,* which seems to say, "Just think of that!"; or

simply another interrogation, often merely repeating the original one. Or the response may be a combined ejaculation-interrogation: "Yeah, what *is* so rare as a day in June?" (or a day in September), or "Yeah, how *can* one prepare high school students for freshman English?"

I suspect, though, judging from the usual context of the question, that both an effect *and* an answer are intended, in which case the question is "rhetorical" less for its function than for its relation to the art of rhetoric itself.

Directors of freshman English, those sometimes less than harmless drudges of English departments, who have on occasion been notoriously generous with their advice to their high school colleagues, sometimes respond to the rhetorical question by expatiating about sins of both commission and omission. This advice is too often delivered in a tone that is at once hieratic, pontifical, and sometimes naive.

A somewhat less naive — and hopefully not at all pontifical or hieratic — response to the question, "How can I prepare my students for freshman English?" is another question or series of questions. "It is a fact not easily learned (and almost never in school) that the 'answer' to a great many questions is 'merely' another question," Postman and Weingartner note in *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (1969, p. 68). Perhaps a suitable initial response, then, would be the question: Is it feasible for a high school teacher to prepare his students for a college course with a score of diversified objectives, a course which varies widely from school to school and is entirely absent from some? The noble but misguided attempt to do so usually results in a last-gasp stagger through grammar, in Custer's Last Stand, with the teacher reenacting the role of Custer, and with the Indians probably being no better prepared to answer when the voice of the Great Wahcondah of Rhetoric calls them (or calls them down).

Even if it *were* feasible, however, would it be *desirable* for a high school English teacher to have as his goal the preparation of his students for College Spinach? Perhaps a suitable answer to the question "How?" is another question: "What?" *What* are the *goals* of high school English? Is senior English to be regarded as a service course to prepare students for College Spinach 100, somewhat as the latter is considered by some to be merely a service course for the rest of the university? Of course, if there were no service course, who could be blamed for poor service? Everyone, it seems, needs a scapegoat, who in due course of time is made a scapegrace.

The rhetorical question is as valid as this hypothetical question

posed by a high school football coach to the head football coach at the University of Illinois: "How can I prepare my players for the Illinois-Wisconsin game?" Perhaps we composition teachers could learn something from the football coaches. They stress punting, passing, and blocking as separate skills requiring hours of practice, averaging from three to four hours daily. If the composition teacher requires just eight compositions during a semester and if the student spends just two hours in writing each, he has had only sixteen hours of practice in a semester, the amount of practice the football player has in a single week. Certainly the writing of lucid, forceful prose is at least as demanding as playing left tackle. Nor does the football coach at Mount Carroll Community High School warn, threaten, or cajole his players about the Illinois-Wisconsin game, any more than Bob Blackman warns, threatens, or cajoles his Fighting Illini about the Chicago Bears–Green Bay Packers game. If the Mount Carroll Hawks learn well, practice long, and are lucky, they *may* be ready for their weekend clash with the Beavers of Lanark Community High.

Why are we composition teachers not equally as sensible? The purpose of English in high school is not to prepare students for English in college any more than the purpose of English in college is merely to prepare students to pass essay examinations in other courses. Nor is freshman English simply an end, any more than high school English is simply a means to that end; rather, both are important means to the end of helping students write lucid, forceful prose. As the late John Dos Passos expressed it in a letter to me shortly before his death, "The aim is to teach the puddenheads to write a simple English sentence that can be understood." The composition teacher should not "warn, threaten, and cajole" but *teach.*

Bernard Malamud, in his novel *A New Life* (Dell, 1963), describes the freshman students of S. Levin, teacher of composition at Cascadia College:

> Levin's freshmen, when he met them, were eighteen and warm. Many were fine people, earnest, ambitious in uncomplicated ways, some obviously bright, but very few he knew were committed to ideas or respected intellectualism. They showed no interest in the humanities and arts. They overvalued "useful" knowledge and confused vocational training with humanistic education. They consistently applied standards of technical efficiency to the values and purposes of life. . . . Even their fears were unimaginative: not that civilization was imperiled and might be destroyed, but that if their grades were not high enough they would miss out on the "good jobs" and have to settle for a "lower standard of living." They were badly informed about themselves and the world. Their

> intelligence, their lives, were absorbed in triviality. They had lost much without knowing it.... Still, a teacher's job was patiently to teach them. It was the nature of the profession: respect those who seek learning and help them learn what they must know.

Not what they must know simply to pass a present or future course but what they must *know.* And what is *worth* knowing in composition? And *for what?* Postman and Weingartner phrase one of their "What's-Worth-Knowing" questions as follows: "What does the organism require in order to thrive?" Not just to *survive* (either in a present or future course or in life) but to *thrive,* to flourish in present and future communication needs. Truly to *communicate* in writing, truly to *compose,* is to engage in a process related to basic human needs. Poet Howard Nemerov (in a letter to me) advises the composition teacher to "stress at the very start that our civilization lives on words to an unprecedented extent, so that anyone at all may find himself 'a writer'."

Composition teachers, on both the high school and the college levels, would do well to frame questions which are "responsive to the actual and immediate as against the fancied and future needs of learners in the world..." (Postman and Weingartner, p. 60). The very nature of the question, "How can I prepare my students for freshman English?" seems to suggest responsiveness to "the fancied and the future." For the composition teacher to be responsive primarily to "service" in the future rather than in the "insistent present" is to contribute to the distaste of Spinach and to render the needle jabs even more taxing. Much of composition teaching is already taxing enough, typified as it often is by taxonomy and taxidermy.

What better way, indeed what other valid way is there to meet future needs for composition than to ask, answer, and actuate this question: How can I help my students communicate meaningfully and effectively their experience *now* in lucid, forceful prose? If high school teachers ask and seek to answer this question and then actuate the answers, their students will probably be ready when college composition teachers ask, answer, and actuate the same question. "Learning should not only take us somewhere," Jerome Bruner has written; "it should allow us to go further more easily" (*The Process of Education,* 1963, p. 17). Where is learning in high school English taking students — merely to college English?

In addition to framing questions of their own, composition teachers would do well to *generate* questions among their students. Several that Postman and Weingartner (pp. 62-63) suggest are relevant to composition:

"If you had an important idea that you wanted to let everyone (in the world) know about, how might you go about letting them know?" (There are various possible versions of this question, such as: How would you go about letting your friends know? Your parents? Your principal? The editor of your town's newspaper? Your state senator?)
"When you hear or read or observe something, how do you know what it means?"
"Where does 'meaning' come from?"
"What does 'meaning' mean?"

Others can be added:

How is meaning transferred?
Why do words and other symbols have different meanings for different people, and even for the *same* people?
What would happen if we, like Humpty-Dumpty, made words mean "just what we choose them to mean — neither more nor less"?
Where does meaning reside — in words, in events, in us?
What happens when the word-symbol is mistakenly believed to be the event or object?
What happens inside us when we experience something?
What happens when we attempt to communicate an experience?
What really *is* "communication"?
What is involved in the act of composing? What are the difficulties?
What is the significance of grammar, of mechanics, in writing?
What did Aldous Huxley mean when he said that "all our mistakes are basically grammatical"?
To what extent is writing an act of exploration? What did E. M. Forster mean by his question: "How do I know what I think until I see what I say?"
What kinds of questions must one ask and answer for himself before, during, and after the writing of a paper?

Along with generative grammar and rhetoric, composition classes need a generative-question approach.

Perhaps the real import of the "rhetorical" question directs us to wider considerations and still other questions. For example, what should a student be reasonably expected to know about grammar, language, and rhetoric by the time he gets to college? This question suggests the need for further research concerning a sequential composition program. According to the late Francis Christensen, one of the deadliest features of English teaching has been the tedious repetitiousness. "Year after year, the lesson in grammar, in junior high or earlier, to the last, in freshman English in college, it is the same thing, as if on a broken phonograph record . . ." ("The Child's Right to a Teacher Who Knows," *The English Language in the School Program,* ed. Robert Hogan, 1966, p. 275). It is time we took steps to make "the teaching of grammar and of composition based on it sequential and cumulative, to move from the circular treadmill to a spiral curriculum."

To ask on which curve of the spiral one must be, however, is to suggest some common misconceptions about articulation. It suggests that there is necessarily a specific place where one *should* be at any given time, that this is determinate or determinable, that once a given subject or skill is "covered" it should be unnecessary, and would be undesirable, to cover it again farther up the spiral. A more valid question might be: Would particular compositional questions elicit different responses when asked at different stages of the writer's development? For example, the notion that punctuation ought to be covered far down the spiral, once and for all, is taxonomic. Punctuation, like other grammatical and rhetorical considerations, is often a matter of taste determined by the author's purpose. Perhaps more than *articulation*, English teachers at all levels need mutual *illumination, edification, stimulation* and, above all, *generation* of questions and *examination* of answers.

Perhaps the "rhetorical" question is intended to ask, "What do colleges expect freshman students to be able to *do* in the college composition course?" But this, too, is a loaded question. There are idealistic and realistic answers. Some writers, such as Kitzhaber, maintain that the high school is where much of the present work of freshman English ought to be taken care of. This would supposedly upgrade the freshman course, permitting it to raise writing level from competence to distinction, to improve and develop mature style, to emphasize rhetoric above and beyond mere grammar. According to Warner G. Rice, author of that controversial article calling for the abolition of freshman English as it is now commonly taught from the curriculum (*College English*, XXI, April 1960), "College will expect a level of proficiency in reading which will insure that he can understand and analyze prose of moderate difficulty, as well as poetry of at least the simpler sort; and that his writing in expository and argumentative essays exhibits no gross errors."

Surely it is neither unreasonable nor unrealistic for colleges to expect freshman students to be able to write something worthwhile about a suitable subject. Robert Frost could have been speaking for the composition teacher when he wrote in "A Considerable Speck": "How glad I am to find on any sheet the least display of mind." Once again, a series of pertinent questions seems in order. Can the student select, organize, and present his material lucidly and effectively? Can he adequately limit his topic and formulate a workable thesis sentence of commitment? Can he provide specific details and develop his ideas logically and coherently? Can he write intelligently and grammatically appropriate sentences? Does he have

some understanding of paragraphing, or does he seem to start a new paragraph because it looks as if "it's time for another"? Does his punctuation have a raison d'etre, or does it appear that he has taken handfuls of commas and sprinkled them rather liberally over the page? Can he use, properly and effectively, words of his own choosing? Can he, as Thomas Henry Huxley expressed it, stand cross-examination on every word?

It may be that the question, "How can I prepare my students for freshman English?" is best treated as one for which no answer is possible. The respective, if not always mutually respected, responsibilities of high school and college composition teachers lie instead in asking, answering, and actuating the question, "How can I help my students communicate meaningfully and effectively their experience now in lucid, forceful prose?" If this question is asked, answered, and actuated, students will most likely be ready when the same question is treated on another level in college. And the dears might even acquire a taste for Spinach.

Perhaps, ultimately, the most suitable response to even the rephrased rhetorical question is an emphatic interrobang, the typographic symbol designed by the American Type Founders Company. A combination exclamation point and question mark, the symbol conveys the idea of enthusiasm, emphasis, and inquisitiveness all at the same time. There is, after all, no *one* successful way to teach composition, no open sesame. According to an old saying, children enter school as question marks and leave as periods; rather, they should be leaving as interrobangs, enthusiastically inquisitive. If, as e. e. cummings wrote, "Life's not a paragraph" and death is "no parenthesis," teaching composition or learning to compose is not a period but an interrobang.

A Behavioristic Approach to Teaching Freshman Composition

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There is and will continue to be a good deal of controversy over what approach to take when teaching freshman composition. What goes on in a composition class can range from sensitivity training

to lectures on classical rhetoric. There exist instructors who believe that composition cannot be taught; rather, it is a process of self-discovery and "letting it all hang out." There are others who would reduce the teaching of composition to the memorization of a set of rules. While these perennial discussions rage, the developments in learning theory seem to be generally overlooked, except by those who are still trying to program writing courses. And even many of these individuals have only partially explored the ramifications of learning theory to instruction in composition.

As if the debate between the "subject-centered" and "student-centered" avenues were not enough, those who are indulging in the writing of behavioral objectives and those who have jumped on the accountability bandwagon have also added their smoke to the smolder. This is to say that none of the above-mentioned positions are completely devoid of truth; rather, it is to say that none holds a monopoly on it. While the classicist and romanticist argue over what is good writing, as well as how best to teach it, the behavior objective writers try to describe what they want in the way of writing and the accountability faddists try to measure what they want.

Rather than indulge in any of the above-mentioned smoke, I intend to light the fire, which will no doubt generate a little heat even if no light, by describing my Pavlovian approach to the teaching of freshman composition. However, this approach, which goes beyond Pavlov's classical conditioning, is quite eclectic, since I am also indebted to Watson, Hull, Skinner, and William Glasser, to name only a few.

The first and most essential step is simply that of defining one's objectives. I let my students know that the course they are currently enrolled in is designed to help them develop strategies for writing an expository essay on any topic in a manner acceptable to the academic community. I assume that freshman composition is a service course. I assume that the academic community is intolerant of ambiguities, fallacies, and plagiarism, and insists on a clear, concise, and logical form of writing which is relatively free of errors in usage, mechanics, and spelling. I explain to the students that vulgarisms and slang will be no more acceptable in a scholarly paper than the proverbial turd in the punch bowl. Indeed, such ignorance may very well get about the same reaction.

Once the students have the objectives clearly in mind, I break down the desired terminal writing behavior into component parts. The first part deals with the prewriting experience of formulating a question and translating that question into a hypothesis. Of course

the hypothesis must be analysized to determine specifically what information must be obtained either to prove or disprove it. Here the student learns to use the three questions of the classical rhetoricians to determine the point at issue. This naturally leads to the discovery of arguments and some elementary rules of evidence as well as to distinguishing between fact and opinion.

The second segment deals with organization. Initially the concentration is on the whole essay: the beginning, middle, and end. Students must learn the various methods of organizing a composition and develop an ability to discriminate as to which method of organization best supports the particular thesis to be developed. From organizing the whole composition, I proceed to organizing the paragraph. The focus is first on the vital elements of the whole composition and then refinement to include paragraph development, sentence structure, diction, logic, mechanics, and spelling. Finally tropes and other embellishments can be considered. The important thing about segmenting is that students are required to master only one or two new behaviors at a time which cumulatively will lead to the course objective, an excellent composition.

Since much behavior is modeled, model compositions are provided. Both excellent and poor models are used. Poor models, as compared to good models, help enable the student to discriminate between effective and less effective features in expository prose. Since the models used were written by students in a situation similar to theirs, the models are relevant; yet since they were not written by the student, the student can participate in criticism of the model without the feeling of being put down. The text used for this purpose is *The Student Speaks Out* published by William Brown Company. It provides student writing with criticism in the margin by the authors. The student is asked if he agrees or disagrees with the criticism and is required to support his answer.

Without going into further detail concerning the modeling, it is essential to relate the incentive and reward system used. The operant conditioning is quite obvious. First, I require a good thesis statement, an introduction of that thesis, a method of development, the body, the summation, reaffirmation of thesis, and comment. Unless each of these elements is present, the paper fails. If the paper has the elements just mentioned, it is a D paper. To obtain a C, the student must use adequate transitions between paragraphs and within the paragraph itself in order to obtain coherence. To obtain a B, the paper must also be reasonably free of errors in grammar, diction, mechanics, and spelling. The A paper must be

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free from fallacies and show the proper use of tropes, style, some spirit, and imagination, the latter two being measured rather subjectively. It is important to note that each grade relates to something specific in the composition and that definite levels of mastery are sought. As the focus of objectives changes, so does the grading. At all times, it must be specific and the students must understand it.

Finally, the incentive plays its role. A student's grade in the course consists of his highest sustained level of achievement. Although the first three papers are not assigned a letter grade, they are criticized. Of the six papers, only the last three count toward the grade. However, the student has the option of counting the third paper for a grade and thus only writing five complete papers in a twelve-week period rather than six. In addition to this, the students may rewrite their papers for grades as many times as they wish, provided each successive rewrite is an improvement. In practice, a B and two A papers are considered as an A in the course.

In practice how does it work? I'm embarrassed almost every time I turn my grade sheet in. Out of twenty-seven students I usually end up giving twenty-five A's and perhaps two B's. Every student has the chance to succeed, to get the grade he is satisfied with.

Maximizing Proofreading

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At the beginning of each semester I hand out a mimeographed sheet to my freshmen rhetoric students stressing the importance of proofreading with such statements as, "It's your responsibility to proofread your paper, not mine. We'll have a lot more time to talk about content and style if accidental mechanical errors don't get in our way." And at the beginning of each semester I hold on to the ever-dimmer hope that this time my students will heed my exhortations. Midway through last semester the light dawned. I came to the realization that the way to maximize proofreading was not to hand out strongly worded mimeographed sheets along with a lot of rhetoric. The search for new tactics began.

Traditionally, proofreading is often viewed as a before-the-paper-is-typed activity which is to be distinguished from the final

check for typographical errors. The student is advised to write a rough draft, revise it, proofread it, type it, and finally to check for typographical errors. I submit that this traditional view of proofreading plays down its importance. According to this view, there is only one major point at which the student proofreads. Students become so concerned with the appearance of their paper that there is a strong tendency not to correct errors noted, for example, at the last minute before handing in the paper. The attitude becomes, "Oh, well, I can't do anything now."

This attitude is directly related to the fact that in the minds of many teachers, and consequently in the minds of many students, proofreading is a solitary at-home activity that is not a major part of the writing experience. But, in fact, proofreading need not be solely an at-home activity. Indeed, unless it is given a proper place in the classroom, the student is reinforced in thinking that proofreading is of trivial importance, and the looks of his paper gain disproportionate significance.

In addition, if, as has unfortunately been the case, speakers of nonstandard English are to be required to write in standard English, such speakers must be given every opportunity to "correct" their grammar through proofreading. Otherwise, writing for these students and for their teachers becomes synonymous with using standard English grammar, and the two, student and teacher, never get around to talking about modes of discourse or rhetorical techniques in terms of what the student has down on paper. So, Miss Fidditch rides again. At best, the student will end up writing Engfish, a poor best. At worst, the student will decide that since writing means grammar, and he has a hard time with grammar, he can't write. Neither result is defensible.

In an attempt to meet some of these problems, the students in my class were advised that any and all penciled-in corrections were legitimate — that the important thing was that they correct spelling and grammatical errors. All that was necessary was that the paper be legible. In order to facilitate student engagement in this type of proofreading, students were often asked to take a few minutes during a class period to "proofread your paper once more." Interestingly enough, I heard students advising fellow students concerning technicalities of grammar. Even students who seemed particularly adverse to studying grammar resorted to their grammar books in efforts to advise fellow students. I am convinced more learning went on at that stage than goes on when a teacher labels all the subject-verb agreement errors for the student, writing

in the corrections for him, or even taking the more pedagogically sound tactic of asking the student to correct those errors the teacher has noted.

After I felt students were secure enough about their writing and familiar enough with each other to engage in some constructive criticism of each other's writing, I asked the class to xerox their papers and exchange them for proofreading by someone else. It was emphasized that their role was that of proofreader at this stage, not that of critic. Students who could not find tense shifts, subject-verb agreement errors, and verb form errors in their own papers proved, at times, to be eminently capable of finding those same errors in others' papers.

After the exercise, the class discussed involvement with their own writing and achieving some degree of distance. One student even suggested it might be a good idea to pretend you're proofreading someone else's paper. Another said, "I always put my paper away after I write it and then proofread it the next day." I confessed I always read my paper aloud. It seemed the exercise was a success.

Gradually I found that even when I didn't provide the time for in-class proofreading, students would pencil in corrections on their own initiative; sometimes even saying, "I'm going to proofread this one more time." Proofreading became almost fun. The "Did you proofread this?" questions at the end of the papers became fewer and fewer. Proofreading became a learning process and it was easier for me as a teacher to distinguish the real problem areas.

It is my contention that promoting such an attitude concerning proofreading causes the teacher and the student to put the mechanics of writing into proper perspective. The student is made to see that the mechanics are important, that his writing may not be clear if it is mechanically incorrect, that one means of checking on his mechanics is by proofreading. And yet what is communicated is the idea that what is of basic importance are the student's ideas and the words he uses to express them; grammar and mechanics are only a means to an end. By maximizing proofreading the teacher tells the student, "I'm on your side!" He or she provides the student with an essential tool, and, perhaps not least importantly, the teacher finds himself or herself with more time to teach writing.

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Turn on the Power: Marking and Grading in Remedial Composition

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The dialogue is familiar:

Teacher: Johnny, what did you want to tell us?
Johnny: I seen —
Teacher: I *saw*.
Johnny: I saw some men, they —
Teacher: I saw some men *who*.
Johnny: I saw some men who be going to —
Teacher: I saw some men who *were* going to.
Johnny: Forget it.

What teachers who tell this joke with scorn may not have realized is that they may be committing the same sin when they grade compositions. Confidence, even a lack of self-consciousness, may be the most important advantage a writer has. Everyone has had interesting experiences, has important opinions and insights — and everyone has things to say. But when we halt the remedial student's every sentence and quibble over his verb endings, we convince him that while he may have things to say, he isn't capable of saying them.

Somehow a distinction must be made between what is important and what is a means to an end. We need to build up trust and confidence before we begin to halt and correct the student's grammar. The teacher's comments on the student's papers offer a most promising but under-utilized motivational and instructional tool. These comments can forge a bond between teacher and students as well as teach a student to write.

MARKING THE PAPER

The comments written on the student's papers can serve four important functions, each of which aids in the successful teaching of a course designed to produce competent, correct writers. First, they are a kind of individual attention to which the student may refer again and again. Second, because they can be reviewed, they are less open to student forgetfulness and misinterpretation than are spoken comments. Third, they are an on-going record of stu-

dent progress, areas of difficulty, and areas of success. Finally, the comments allow a teacher to praise and encourage the student.

How can the teacher grade or comment on the student's paper in order to best serve these functions? It seems to me that good grading "talks" to a student paper. As the teacher reads, he reacts to what the student says and how he says it. If a sentence is read and the reaction is "Clever comparison!", then that should be written on the paper; spontaneous praise is good motivation. If a sentence had to be read two or three times to be understood, that should be indicated on the paper as an area that needs improvement. The student has been at the mercy of subjective, incomprehensible grading too long. What does "Weak organization. Occasionally unclear. C" really mean to the remedial student — or even the grader the next day? When the student asks to discuss his paper, the teacher is often hard pressed to remember just how he arrived at the grade.

When a paper has been graded in a "talk-to" manner, teacher-student conferences will be more productive. Too often most of the time at a conference is spent rereading the paper; after a paper has been graded by the "talk-to-the-paper" method, the student comes to the conference knowing clearly what the teacher objected to. He and the teacher are ready, then, to discuss how the student can improve or correct his papers. Instead of reading along and saying, "Here is a vague description," the teacher can say, "Look, you had four vague descriptions — what can you do to describe more effectively?" The student can be led to think of using examples, sensory details, anecdotes, or a thesaurus. Time for extra practice or sentence rewriting opens up in such a conference. The conference time is spent productively, giving the student an opportunity for learning to cope successfully with his writing problems instead of hearing only a recount of his errors.

A second guideline in grading is that the student as an individual stylist should be respected. Too often the student has felt personally attacked when the way he said something was criticized. Idiomatic expressions, slang, or unusual sentence order can be quite effective and clear. The student should know that we grade because we are trying to help him achieve clarity. Sentence order, spelling, and punctuation should concern us primarily when clarity or force suffer. In a paper describing the propaganda aspects of television, a student wrote:

> But what is fear? People who have the audacity to feel uneasy about the next door neighbors watching them hang out the Monday morning's wash which is not a Tide wash.

This has grammatical mistakes and could be labeled "Frag," but should such originality be discouraged in a remedial student?

A third guideline is that our comments must be clear and explanatory. Basically there are three kinds of comments: "talk-to" comments which usually are clear because they are honest and spontaneous, corrective comments linked to words or ideas in the body of the paper, and evaluative comments which deal with the paper as a whole.

Corrective comments are the most difficult to write and the most misused. If we step back and think about the situation, the usual corrective comments such as "Verb-Subject Disagreement," "Ref?", and "Poss" are nearly ridiculous in the remedial situation. If the student understood or cared about such categories he most likely would not be a candidate for remedial English. In fact many grammatical explanations are unnecessary for the nonspecialist and merely complicate an already difficult and short-term job.

Many typical errors can be eliminated in a remarkably short time. Contractions, for example, must be near the top of the list of red-ink winners. "Its" for "it's" and "your" for "you're" join the perennial "there," "their," and "they're" frustration parade. A radical but effective cure (nearly instantaneous, too) is to ban the use of contractions for at least half of the term. If the students use no contractions (a respected rule for formal writing anyway), they make no contraction errors. Of course, the real purpose of this is to teach them to be aware of the difference between "it's" and "its." After weeks of deliberately writing "it is," few students forget that the apostrophe stands for the left-out "i."

Instead of writing "WW," the teacher thinks, "How can I make the student aware of this word?" After all, a vast majority of remedial students are remedial partly because they have never noticed words, never trained their eyes to "see" a word when deciding on its rightness. For example, one frequent kind of "WW" or awkwardness error is inappropriate word choice. The student who writes "Because the average American is so worried about self-preservation, he does not realize how deceptive TV commercials are" or "The freshman is often discouraged toward college in the first week" writes English as though he were foreign. Why? Probably he is trying to imitate some standard he thinks he can hear; he thinks he is supposed to sound this way. College writing or even intelligent writing is supposed to sound educatedly complex, he thinks. The sympathetic teacher will write beside these sentences, "Would you *say* this?" or "Does this sound right to you?" At the same time the class should be encouraged to write

as they would talk to a respected educated person instead of echoing the often pretentious, stilted essays read from bad books or papers-to-please-the-teacher. Rather than labeling the students' writing awkward, stilted, or filled with wrong words, what the teacher can do, in fact, is to tell the student his writing can be better than this echoed standard and encourage him to write as clearly and directly as he can.

Clear comments are frequently a matter of translation or more detailed explanation of the accepted grading shorthand. "Which 'he' do you mean?" is more clear than "Ref," and "You need a longer pause than a comma indicates here" than "comma splice." We must assume that the remedial student knows no technical, grammatical terminology.

Some problems require more detailed explanations. Verb-subject agreement is one; basically the student has to learn that while we make nouns plural by adding "s" we make verbs plural by erasing the "s." The fact that this applies to the third person singular alone makes the job easier for the teacher. He should be able to teach the student to watch out for singular words (except "I" and "you"), to check if the word is linked to a verb and if the verb is also singular, and then to put an "s" on the appropriate word. Like all rules, this one has exceptions, but the exceptions are less bewildering than the standard approach.

Comma usage can be derived by students themselves using their first four or five papers on which the teacher has added or marked through extra commas without comment. The students list sentences to which the teacher has added commas as well as places where they used commas; then they categorize the places where commas are needed. The following is part of a list made out by a remedial class:

Pairs of commas are needed:

1. When the sentence is interrupted. An example is "He wanted to go, of course, but couldn't."
2. When you say the name of the person to whom you're talking in the middle of the sentence. "Do you want that box, Mary, or the bag?"

Single commas are needed:

1. In a list: Examples; "He bought eggs, bread, and milk." "That is a large, shaggy, noisy dog."
2. When you pause before a second sentence joined to the first by "and," "but," or "or." Example: "He wanted to go to the party, but he needed to study."

The vocabulary is their own as are the examples; because they have formulated the categories and classified their own mistakes, they

understand the "rules." Most classes classify all of the uses of the comma in ten or eleven rules.

With regard to the evaluative comment at the end of the paper, an axiom is to write something good and something bad on each paper thereby encouraging and pushing the student. In every paper there is something good — a bit of sparkling description, a funny story, a deeply felt emotion, a good topic. After recognizing this, the evaluative comment can summarize the feelings and comments about the paper — what needs improvement, what *specifically* needs work. Here are some comments which follow this guideline:

> Your organization is good and your point is clear. You need some striking examples from personal experience or observations to make us remember what you're saying.
>
> This is an entertaining paper, and your description of the Salem commercial is excellent. But what is the point? Couldn't you do more than merely describe cigarette commercials well? Could you have pointed something out to us? taught us something?

The final guideline is that the evaluation be motivational. The student should have a feeling that the teacher is actively involved in his progress, concerned about his problems and successes, and careful in his reading. Any grading which follows the first three guidelines should make this clear. All comments should be directed toward showing the student his strengths, helping him recognize his problems in clarity, and developing his self-confidence in himself as a writer and thinker. If a comment does none of these things, it should be omitted. "Incoherent" hurts while "I don't understand" points out that the *reader* has a problem and the writer can help. Even too many "sp's" can defeat the final goal; the student has been told already that he can't write — we want to tell him that he can, and that we will help him prove it.

Finally, the student is motivated when the evaluative comment says, "You can do better." Instead of F or D the teacher might give RW for "rewrite" with definite, clear suggestions for improvement. His final grade, then, will consider how many of these suggestions the student did implement.

GRADING THE PAPER

Grading the paper, however, may still be a problem. Some teachers have long given a grade for content and one for mechanics or grammar. More often than not, however, the content grade is a half-hearted recognition that what has been said touched some spring in the teacher's heart, and he wanted to reward it even if he and the student really know the paper was not up to par.

The problem is not really that usage is more important than content; the problem is that usage is so much easier to grade, so much more objective. Some criteria for judging content should be formulated that both teacher and student can keep in mind. The teacher should know the objectives, the purpose of his assignment, and this will dictate many of the standards.

At the beginning the list of criteria should be small. The student, then, will be encouraged to master these. For example, the student might begin by trying for a few telling details, a unified communication of an experience or a simple explanation of an opinion, and some support for his points. Then the student, the teacher, or even the class could rate his success.

Eventually a list of skills something like this should evolve:

I. Style
   - A. Appropriateness of usage (consistent, not substandard or stilted)
   - B. Word choice (free from cliches, panaceas; is concise, precise)
   - C. Vocabulary (nuances of meaning and connotation used effectively)
   - D. Sentence structure (effectiveness, clarity)
   - E. Variety and complexity of sentence patterns
   - F. Use of details
   - G. Introduction (interest, effectiveness)
   - H. Conclusion (interest, effectiveness)

II. Organization
   - A. Transitions between sentences, paragraphs, ideas
   - B. Paragraphing (unity, structure)
   - C. Sophistication and complexity of argumentative structure

III. Logic
   - A. Support for opinions
   - B. Clear argument or progression
   - C. Development
   - D. Insight

IV. Creativity and originality (these may be in organization, plot, imagery, language, etc.)
   - A. Forcefulness
   - B. Interest

Obviously, to rate every student in every category for each paper he writes would be laborious and impossible for the classroom teacher. As a recurrent check on student progress and a set of motivational standards kept in students' and teachers' minds, it is extremely valuable. At last the effectiveness of his communication has assumed the stature and attention it deserves.

There are at least three ways to use this scale. For the experienced teacher a simple three-point scale works well. "One" is below average, "two" represents average writing ability of the students in the regular English course, and "three" is above average. It may

be helpful to expand the scale, making "one" far below average and "five" superior. Many remedial students, for example, are far better than the average student in their use of telling details and connotative words. Rewards for such strengths encourage students greatly.

A second way to use this scale is as a means to record and encourage each student's progress. The student's successes could be plotted on a graph every two weeks. He could plot the teacher's rating on the one-to-five scale; or he could plot the number of times he needed to use more forceful words, combine two paragraphs into one, add a transition element, and so on, by using the teacher's grading marks and comments.

The third use of this scale is perhaps the most effective of all. Part of it is reproduced something like this and handed out to the students in the class:

Paper written by _____.

1. Read the whole paper without stopping and put a check in the margin on the left side of the paper for any line that was not clear or that you had to read twice.
2. Briefly, what is the paper saying?
3. Now go back to the lines you checked in 1. Why weren't they clear? Tell him using grading marks and comments.
4. Rate the following skills:

	Good	*Mediocre*	*Poor*	*Has None*
a. Beginning is interesting				
b. Beginning is effective				
c. Has a thesis or point				
d. Organization of whole paper				
e. Paper has interesting, pointed details				
f. Supports his points				
g. Uses specific examples				
h. Clarity of paper				
i. Effectiveness of conclusion				

	Too Short	*Right*	*Too Long*
j. Length			

5. Does this paper have anything that shows originality or creativity? If so, what?
6. The best thing about this paper is:
7. Suggestions for improvement:
8. Other comments:

A student's paper is presented (dittoed, with an overhead projector, or read aloud), and the class rates the paper. Most students do a very conscientious job. The student evaluations reinforce and make the teacher's points forcefully. A teacher can complain about lack of specific examples and details for months without making his

point, but a group of the student's peers can complain that a paper is boring and unconvincing and suggest what they would have liked to know about, and the point is made. Furthermore, each student who is evaluating is analyzing and thinking about writing. He admires what is good and may try it the next time he writes; he notices what is tiresome to read and tries to avoid it. Furthermore, the burden of communication is put squarely on the writer — he can no longer blame the teacher's age or mind for what is not understood. He begins to care about clarity and effectiveness.

In "other comments" students frequently respond to, reply to, add to, or disagree with the student's opinions and experiences. A shared interest develops, new writing topics are generated, the class becomes a group — people who know each other intellectually as well as casually. Ideally a class should be working toward a common goal, cooperating, interacting with each other, not just with the teacher. Such an approach to composition makes writing a group effort — and a successful group effort.

This kind of grading may take a little longer, but it does save hours of repetitious explanation to a class, half of which needs to know about making words plural and half of which does not. It also saves hours of conference time. Most important of all, it saves the student from another year of repeating all that hasn't worked before.

Some of the Best Illinois High School Poetry and Prose

This year some of the best poetry written by Illinois students in grades seven through twelve will be published in the March *Bulletin*, and some of the best prose will appear in the April issue. This is your invitation to submit selected writings of your students.

Please observe the following rules carefully:

1. Please send *poetry* manuscripts to William Linneman, Chairman, Department of English, Illinois State University, Normal, Illinois 61761. Send *prose* to John I. Ades, Chairman, Department of English, Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville, Edwardsville, Illinois 62025.

2. If possible send the manuscripts no later than December 15, in order that they may be judged during Christmas vacation. Jan-

uary 15 is the final deadline; no piece received after that date can be judged.

3. Typed copy is preferred, but is not absolutely essential. Send manuscripts first class. No manuscripts will be returned unless you enclose an addressed envelope of sufficient size and with first-class postage affixed.

4. Each teacher is requested to send no more than five pieces of prose or ten poems. The work should be carefully screened on the local level. Judges can work more effectively if they do not have to screen out manuscripts of inferior quality.

5. It is preferable that each manuscript submitted be typed or written on regular 8½" by 11" paper, or, in the case of works submitted in school publications, that each selection for judging be mounted on 8½" by 11" paper. Interesting and attractive as many of the literary magazines are, handling entries submitted in that form is awkward.

6. Do not hesitate to send writing by your seventh, eighth, and ninth graders. The student's year in school will be considered by the judges so that seventh graders, for instance, will not be competing with twelfth graders.

7. Any writing done during the second semester of the 1972-73 school year or during this year until the deadline for submission of manuscripts is admissible.

8. At the *end* of each selection, include the necessary information in exactly this form:

> Edward Kelly, tenth grade, Zuma High School, James Jackson, teacher

9. Make a careful check of the punctuation of the poetry as well as of the prose. Many poems in the past have been disqualified because of inadequate punctuation.

10. Before the submission of manuscripts, check with each student to be sure the work is original. Failure to submit original work can cause embarrassment to the writer, to the teacher, and to the *Bulletin*. Enclose with the writing a statement to this effect: To the best of my knowledge the enclosed manuscripts were written by the students whose names they bear.

ERIC

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